

COMMISSION ON WIDENING ACCESS CALL FOR EVIDENCE – RESPONSE FORM

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Introduction

The Open University's mission is to be open to people, places, methods and ideas. Social mobility and justice are at the heart of everything the University does and widening access to Higher Education is the ambition on which it was founded.

The Open University in Scotland therefore very much welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Commission's call for evidence and hopes that this represents the beginning of a positive dialogue.

The identification and removal of barriers to access and retention

Identifying barriers

Barriers to accessing Higher Education can be systemic, cultural, socio-economic or personal. The Open University (OU) avoids the major systemic barrier through its open access policy, meaning that entry qualifications traditionally required by other HEIs are not necessary for the majority of its undergraduate courses.

At present, much of the focus in relation to access is on those (potential) students – specifically, school-leavers – living in areas of multiple deprivation (as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)); however, for any given individual – not necessarily a young person – a more complex picture is likely to emerge.

Many (potential) students have complicated life circumstances and must juggle competing priorities including, in particular, full- or part-time employment and family or other caring responsibilities. Geography – residence in remote or rural locations – can be a barrier, as can disability, in terms of both physical access and access to appropriate materials and support. Equally, full-time study, often away from home, can attract a number of specific costs – both financial and opportunity – not seen in part-time, open supported learning. For those who have been out of education for some time or who have had a poor previous education experience, low confidence and self-esteem can be issues.

Through the development of its Widening Access and Success Strategy for 2015-18, The OU has identified a number of characteristics which allows it to measure progress by students who are likely to face barriers. Some of these characteristics align with the protected characteristics as defined by relevant equalities legislation (eg. disability); some are non-statutory, such as a low socio-economic or occupational status; some combine elements of both, such as students from a BME background with low previous educational qualifications.

In identifying these characteristics, The OU has moved away from a strategy based on priority groups to one which is based on the needs of the individual, rather than on the group (or groups) to which they may belong.

Overcoming and removing barriers

The OU has identified six priority areas in its Widening Access and Success Strategy. Work undertaken in each of these areas will seek to overcome and remove barriers students with any of the identified characteristics mentioned above may face.

Flexibility and support are the key aspects of The OU's provision. The ability to choose when, where and how much to study allows students facing barriers – particularly in relation to disability, work, family or care commitments – to get the right learning at the right time, and to maintain control of their own schedules.

Of course, this control is not always possible – everyone faces the unexpected from time to time, and The OU's modular provision means that it is possible to take a study break if that's what's needed, without a detrimental effect on progress towards completion of a qualification.

A significant barrier to part-time Higher Education was removed with the introduction by the Scottish Government, and with the encouragement of The OU, of the Part-Time Fee Grant; this has played a significant role in opening up part-time Higher Education for those on low incomes. The OU believes this opening could be extended further with a lower eligibility threshold in respect of credits studied (making it easier for those with lower confidence and self-esteem to make their first steps into Higher Education), and awaits the outcome of the Scottish Government's review of the Grant with interest.

The identification and scaling up of best practice

Learning

From its experience, The OU believes that treating students as individuals and supporting them based on their specific needs (and ambitions) – rather than on the basis of a generic grouping of which they may be a part – is central to any successful access programme or initiative.

Learning journeys once students are engaged can be complex and diverse; however, their paths – their lives – to the point where they actually become engaged can be even more varied. Therefore, successful access programmes must be flexible and adaptable, and must avoid assumptions or judgements about students.

Once on a course, flexibility and personalised support for each student is central to retention and completion and therefore to future success; engaging with and registering students who may face barriers is important – a crucial first step – but it cannot be said that Higher Education is truly more accessible if students are not enabled to succeed.

Scaling

Beyond the foundational nature of its approach to widening access and its unique open access policy, The OU undertakes a number of specific programmes and initiatives intended to further

improve access. As The OU is uniquely placed to deliver learning across Scotland, it may be that some of these could be scaled up significantly.

In particular, The OU is keen to highlight:

- **Young Applicants in Schools Scheme (YASS):** YASS is a widening access initiative that enables S6 pupils at schools across Scotland to bridge the gap between school and university or college by undertaking degree-level study in the classroom alongside the school curriculum. The flexibility of the programme means that participation is not dependent on postcode, student numbers or the ability to pay.
YASS works alongside the Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP) to target schools with low progression to HE, to encourage pupils from non-traditional backgrounds to consider, and prepare, for university or college study. Since it was piloted in 2007, over 3,500 students from 210 schools across Scotland have registered for the scheme.
The OU is currently in discussion with other Scottish HEIs and UCAS to explore the possibility of YASS modules being formally recognised as part of admissions policies.
Following recent changes to ILA eligibility criteria, YASS is funded by the SFC for 2015/16. Identifying a longer term funding solution is a priority for the University.
- **College partnerships:** The OU has articulation and progression agreements with all of Scotland's colleges (with the exception of those in the Highlands and Islands, which are part of UHI). Credit transfer arrangements are in place for any HNC/D to the BA/BSc (Hons) Open degree, and there are agreed pathways from specific HN qualifications to named OU degrees.
- **OU Access curriculum:** From 2014, The OU moved to a new access programme which is designed to maximise student success, retention and progression. The new access programme provides three highly supported accredited modules at SCQF level 6 that facilitate the transition to HE level study. The OU also offers a number of short standalone modules at SCQF 7 which can serve as tasters to support the transition into more substantial HE study.
- **Open Educational Resources:** The OU makes available numerous free short courses and other pieces of content across various open learning platforms. The OU actively uses open educational resources to support its widening access work, eg. the recent launch of Open Pathways to Higher Education, a resource pack that offers various pathways from informal to formal learning. Although measurement of conversion is difficult, informal to formal learning is an important and effective route into HE. The Opening Educational Practices in Scotland (OEPS) project is led by The OU and will be submitting evidence separately.
- **Offender learning:** The OU has provided modules to students in prison since 1972. Through our partnership with the Scottish Prison Service, The OU is able to facilitate access to Higher Education for those prisoners who have not previously had the opportunity to study at this level and who have demonstrated their potential and motivation. The OU in Scotland is the only Scottish HEI represented on the Higher Education Access Board. In 2014-15, The OU had 60 students in 13 prisons and two secure hospitals across all security categories.
- **Employers and trade unions:** The OU works with numerous trade unions and hundreds of Scotland's leading employers to deliver a relevant and responsive curriculum, meeting the needs of students, the economy and society. With around 70% of its students in full- or part-

time work, The OU helps learners of all ages develop their skills and knowledge, opening up opportunities for them and contributing to the Scottish economy.

The data and measures needed to support access and retention

Data to measure progress

The OU believes that a focus on individual needs is paramount to student success; therefore, the data needed to measure progress in relation to widening access must reflect individual characteristics. This is the approach The OU has chosen to take internally.

That means the collection of a variety of information – demographic and socio-economic – relating to the characteristics noted above is necessary. This brings with it some challenges as the disclosure of much of the information required is at the discretion of the student; however, even partial information in this regard still offers a better understanding of student needs than the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, which – though useful in broad terms – cannot tell us anything about students as individuals.

The OU therefore supports the notion, on which Universities Scotland has worked, of a broader ‘basket of measures’ – combining SIMD information with other demographic and socio-economic data as it relates to individual students – in order to better understand both the student body and national progress in relation to widening access.

Admissions

The OU operates an open access policy and therefore it would not be appropriate to comment in detail on what evidence should be considered as part of admission processes. However, the University does believe that, in general, there may be value in a more flexible approach which allows for the consideration of additional achievements outside of traditional qualifications; specifically, OU modules could be formally considered by other HEIs. It may also be considered that The OU is well placed to deliver national widening access provision.

Evidence on the effectiveness of widening access programmes

As a sector, there is insufficient evidence on widening access programmes and initiatives. A number of challenges are apparent: student data is often supplied at the discretion of the student and therefore may be incomplete; different data is collected for different programmes and therefore comparison is difficult (if indeed it is shared); and programmes are often relatively small and it is often not clear how reliable any data captured may be.

The development of an agreed basket of measures and a commitment to (appropriately anonymised) data-sharing would go some way to solving these issues. Well-designed evaluation and, crucially, conversion measurement as part of all widening access programmes is also important.